

A RECONCILIATION OF PARADOX:
HOW TO THINK LIKE A COMEDIAN (AND NOT BE ONE)

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ABSTRACT

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This paper is a tribute to a fascination with comedy. It focuses specifically on humor analysis – pulling apart the pieces that explain why something is funny. The three legs of this paper are how to analyze humor, what is truth in comedy, and techniques for creating humorous content. The paper does not concern itself with psychological or evolutionary explanations for humor, but rather on the pre-existing elements of the content itself.

The expected conclusion is a loose formula for comedy, estimated to be some combination of truth and incongruity: a reconciliation of paradox. The methodology is rooted in the three years I spent studying comedy – stand-up, improv, short stories, sketch, satire – with a fervor that is achieved only before the dream is deferred. As I plan to leave college with subdued comedic aspirations, I take this thesis as a last chance to lay it all down – to tell others and remind myself of all that I’ve learned, and the impact of internalizing the comic’s worldview.

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INTRODUCTION

WHY READ THIS?

And now, why would anyone want to be funny? Why would anyone want to read a thesis describing how to understand funny, think funny, and make funny? Why, it's the very same reason one takes film history in college or voluntarily watches a Netflix docuseries on a convicted killer. It could be fun. Or more – it has the potential to add onto your already budding worldview, and to remind of the abundant ways there are to engage with the world.

Furthermore, I've never heard anyone voice a preference to be unfunny. But in all fairness, I've never thought to ask. Regardless, my message here is the same. The purpose of this essay is not to provide an ironclad formula for humor, as we'll find that none exists. Instead, it's for fun; such is comedy. These pages are my chance to share the lessons I've pieced together from my collegiate obsession with the art form, and for me to pass it along as what it means to me now: something interesting.

THE ROAD AHEAD

Along with other arts such as the visual, culinary, and martial, comedy requires a wide understanding of the field before an individual voice is formed. I break the road to thinking like a comedian into three essential parts: analyzing comedy, finding the truth in comedy, and creating comedy.

First, we look into the importance of constantly asking why something is funny. Whether it be the hit joke at a dinner party, a riddle on the back of the on-the-go yogurt snack Go-gurt, or a stand-up routine by Dave Chappelle, the world is your everlasting oyster in terms of joke deconstruction. Next, I introduce truth in comedy. This involves detecting paradox in the midst

of life's most nuanced moments and operating the potential levers to surface the source of that incongruity. Last but not least, after understanding how to detect the ideas that can be transformed into humorous bits, I dive into how to communicate them effectively. Specifically, we discuss the rhetoric and comedic techniques that can transform a bare-bones concept into a piece of humor. Last and now least, I conclude with my own journey in comedy, only to provide a fuller picture of what it's like to think like an aspiring comedian: the doubts, the bouts of inspiration, and the journey's end.

METHODOLOGY

The bulk of my research took place during my first three years of college. My conclusions formed as I listened to recordings of stand-up specials on my walks to class, wrote jokes in dorm hallways past my roommate's bedtime, and hypothesized the likelihood of making a career out of comedy. As much as I hate to admit it for my own reputation's sake, at one point (and for many points after that!) I considered pursuing comedy. Imagine that. My parents most certainly could not! It shocks me to this day the intensity with which I loved something that no longer occupies such a stubborn hold on my brain. My journey with comedy is a story for another time (i.e. the end of this paper), but right now I use it to note my research methods. My findings are sourced from the years I spent enraptured by a drive to pursue the art form. This includes watching comedy specials from stand-up legends (Lenny Bruce, Dave Chappelle, and Jerrod Carmichael to name a few), analyzing sketch shows such as *Chappelle's Show*, *Monty Python*, and *Saturday Night Live*, consuming short story collections by former SNL writer Simon Rich and *The Harvard Lampoon*, joining two improvisational comedy troupes, writing for *The Texas Travesty* (the university's rudimentary mock of *The Onion* website), and several other

experiences that would help me illustrate my intended point, which is that I have accumulated a well-rounded exposure to comedy in all its glorious facets. I write this all out to explain that my interest was robust. And, that you are in good hands.

DISCLAIMERS

Comedy as a whole is much too subjective for an objective understanding to possibly exist.

While I could issue a blanket statement, and ask you to grant me the understanding that my interpretation of comedy is particular to my tastes and sensibilities, I realized there are particular morsels of wisdom in each of these disclaimers. And so here I present to you my collection, my menagerie of get-out-of-jail-free cards:

1. The Idiosyncrasy of a Sense of Humor

Primarily, the most pungent disclaimer is that these conclusions depend on my personal understanding of comedy. When one details *how* to think funny, one presupposes *what* is funny. A large part of this paper involves dissecting examples of funny material. And because a definition of funny (i.e. sense of humor) differs from person to person, it's completely fair if you don't find a piece of humor I analyze to be funny or a comedic rule I put forward to hold true. "Funny" differs across cultures, generations, within households, among friend groups, between partners. Even within a lifespan our sense of humor can change! However, it is those idiosyncrasies of humor that make it an art form rather than a science. Comedy is personal, unique to the individual, and because of that it grants its wielder a voice. So much of this paper – from the comedians I reference, to the meme analysis I make, and the rules I put forward – rest on my study and sense of humor,

and at some point, could not agree with yours. But I find that exciting: an experience wholly unique to the arts, a subjectivity that will never terminate one's study of comedy. And thus, I hope those moments you might not agree are exponentially recovered in those moments you do.

2. The Many Forms of Comedy

Just as there are many different senses of humor, there are a wide variety of expressions of humor. A few categories include humor writing (books, short stories, essays, *The Onion*), performance (stand-up, improvisational, sketches), visual (comics, memes). In this paper, I will describe certain best practices for comedy, but it is quite possible that a rule might apply to one form of comedy and not another. For example, I might say that brevity is important when writing a satirical 13-word headline for *The Onion*, but one could argue that brevity could have a negative effect in an improv show if one were playing a verbose character. Asking for a universal set of rules in comedy is like asking Tom Cruise to star in every movie. While quite dashing in most cases, at times he will simply not fit the mold!

3. A Preference for Stand-Up

To be more specific with the above disclaimer, I acknowledge here that I am a huge fan of stand-up comedy. This is because I find it the most genuine of the comedies, much more so than the affectations required by playing a character on a stage (and here I first address my contempt of improvisational comedy).

I prefer the kind of comedy that is grounded in structure and content. For example, I will not be writing too much about what makes a silly voice or accent funny. I tend to focus more on the ideas and concepts that simultaneously incite laughter and introspection. Think more Dave Chappelle and less Kevin Hart. To me, perfect comedy is just the right mix of laugh out loud humor and insights that stick with you. While I do try to present analysis on a variety of comedic platforms, I would like to disclaim upfront that I lean more towards the inquisitive veins.

4. Humor v. Laughter

Additionally, this paper focuses more on why something is funny rather than why something makes us laugh. It is a subtle difference, but nevertheless important. There is something special that happens when humor hits you the right way. It is a sensation that I can't quite put into words but e.e. cummings can: "Like the burlesque comedian, I am abnormally fond of that precision which creates movement" (is 5 1926). When we see something funny, even if we don't laugh, there seems to be a sort of recognition that takes place. An acknowledgement that you have just seen something or (if you're lucky) experienced something humorous – an instantaneous inner movement. That is the particular strain of "funny" this paper is going after. I wouldn't want to use laughter as our metric for humor because we often laugh when things aren't funny. The mere fact that you can tickle someone to make them laugh invalidates it for me. Further, people and sisters fake laugh all the time. Many times, fake laughing is a necessity to ensure the delicate fabric of a social interaction.

Instead, I find that humor transcends laughter because it is not purely a physical reaction to something funny, but a conscious recognition. We can decide for ourselves whether or not we find an attempt to be funny, but we cannot control when we instinctually laugh. Besides, if our metric for humor was laughter, I personally wouldn't find much funny then. I have realized that the more you study comedy, the less your body expends energy to laugh. As American writer James Lipton put it, "Comedians don't laugh. They're too busy analyzing why it's funny or not" (Brainyquote).

5. Killing the Frog

Dissecting a joke is similar to asking a magician for his tricks. In fact, it could be graver than that – it's looking at the trick from each possible angle until you come to the formulated magic yourself. Mark Twain described this sensation as follows: "Explaining humor is a lot like dissecting a frog, you learn a lot in the process, but in the end, you kill it" (QuoteInvestigator 2016). You gain access to the levers that manipulate – you see the puppet strings on your back – and a part of you realizes that the words that made you laugh are at some level just words to begin with. But, if you love analysis for analysis's sake, it becomes worth it. Fun almost. Quite necessary too. We can only assemble Frankenstein after we take the time to understand his parts.

PART 1, SECTION A: ANALYZE

Excuse me! Could you please tell me why this is funny!!?

As a diagnostic, before we dive into how to analyze comedy, I would like to test your skills point blank. Below is a fake-news headline, courtesy of humor website *The Onion*. Before continuing, list as many reasons you can think of as to why this might be funny. And, if you don't think it's funny, instead brainstorm a list of reasons why this wasn't, as we'll be covering this too.



NEWS Shared from Onion Gamers Network

Fascinating Lore: Nintendo Revealed That The Reason Mario Always Comes Back To Life After He Dies Is Because Both Heaven And Hell Reject His Soul

(The Onion 2019)

As I mentioned previously, there are three main components to thinking like a comedian – analyzing, finding truth, and creating. Before we can move onto how to create something funny

from scratch, we need to understand how funny even works. We can get to that answer through one simple question – why is that funny? And no, the answer is absolutely not “because it made me laugh.” A laugh is a reaction to your recognition that something is funny; an effect rather than a cause (for more, see disclaimer 4 above).

But, you may wonder, what is the point in figuring out why example A was funny, when you might make a joke that is entirely unrelated to it? That is because even though the manifestations of humor are different, they are all variations of a set of themes. In conditioning the mind to analyze humor, we train a part of our consciousness to constantly engage with the world in that way. In turn, the mind conditions itself to grant unprompted insights, almost like a reflex. Analyzing comedy becomes an automated process.

For those data scientist geeks out there, this is very similar to unsupervised machine learning. We give a computer (in this case your consciousness) a variety of unlabeled data (examples of humor without explanations attached), and over time the computer (you) learns to distinguish patterns on its own. By the simple act of engaging with a variety of examples, I’ve found that your consciousness develops a knack for disassembling comedy. Do this routine enough times and eventually, you’ll find yourself generating a list of comedy explanations unprompted.

YOU ARE WHAT YOU ASK

So, now onto the actual analysis. There are two buckets here – the kinds of questions we ask, and the sorts of answers we get. Simple enough? But what – I said there was only *one* question to ask, which was “why was that funny?” But with simple questions we get simple answers. While we may start with that initial query, follow-up questions are necessary to dig deeper. The

strength of our conclusion depends on the quality of the questions that we ask. I find that there are three types of questions that help me get to the root of why something is funny. These are:

1. Why is this funny?
 - a) Core Concept
 - b) Joke Mechanics
2. What changes would make this less funny?
3. How can we make this funnier?

EXAMPLE 1

Let's start off with an example:



The Onion

‘Oh, Was I Not Enough For You?’ Amazon Echo Asks Couple Bringing New Baby Home

(The Onion 2018)

Alright – so: why is this funny?

First, we strip the headline to its core, surface level premise: an insentient piece of technology confronts humans for not being able to satisfy their emotional needs. Here we also recognize the moving parts – ‘Amazon Echo’, ‘couple’, and ‘emotion’. These levers tend to be nouns.

To further analyze the joke’s core concept:

- A Level of Absurdity: An Amazon Echo cannot talk, let alone feel emotions. The writer presents an absurd situation to us.
- Yet, Relatability: Although there is that presence of absurdity, the writer grounds it in something relatable. The audience can relate to this joke because there is a mistrust towards technology for knowing too much about our lives. Whether it be the home devices secretly listening to our conversations, or the personal data it might be collecting, there seems to be an underlying wariness towards technology. Thus, by acting on this discomfort and introducing a hypothetical, overbearing Amazon Echo, the writer capitalizes on this relatable fear of the growing power of technology in our lives.
- The comparison: the author joins these two elements by comparing the Amazon Echo to a newborn baby. While the premise is absurd, that an Echo could replace a newborn baby, the joke underscores our somewhat scary overreliance on technology.

Analyzing the joke-specific mechanics involves taking a closer look at the joke’s word choice, phrasing, structure, voice, etc. It is a combination of comedic and rhetoric devices.

- Dialogue: By including the dialogue, the writer further anthropomorphizes the Amazon Echo. Simply, the writer made the non-human thing feel more human. If the headline had read “Amazon Echo Feels Insufficient After Couple Brings Baby Home”, it would still

maintain the integrity of the premise, but the Amazon Echo wouldn't fully overstep its insentient bounds. It satisfies the good practice of showing not telling.

- Ending with the words “baby home” leaves a good amount of the shock value for the end of the joke. If the headline had been rephrased to something like “Couple Bringing New Baby Home Shocked When Amazon Echo Says, “Oh Was I Not Enough for You?” The reader would know too much early on. In this way, the joke similarly follows the set-up and punchline format many stand-up comedians use. The set-up is that the Echo feels bad, and the punch is that it feels bad in comparison to a baby. Sure, it wouldn't be illegal to switch it up and have the set-up be the baby's arrival and the punch that the Echo feels bad about the momentous occasion. But for some intangible reason, this just doesn't seem as funny. And you might disagree, and this could be where I pull out the subjective card, but that's an element that is quite satisfying about comedy. Throughout this analysis, I rely on checking hypothetical headlines against my own sense of humor. And somehow, your brain will just know if some change would make a joke more or less funny. And sometimes those decisions will disagree, but the very fact that they exist entail that there is some level of discernment occurring. Some sort of preexisting ticker for what is funny.

Second, we ask what changes would make this joke less funny.

- Insentience: It is important that a piece of technology asks this rather than a sentient being. If a dog had asked “Oh, Was I Not Enough for You?” this headline might still be funny, but it would lose some of its kick. Because technology cannot only speak, but also

cannot feel insufficient (or feel anything for that matter), the joke lands. This choice is crucial.

- The couple is bringing a baby home. If instead they were bringing home a dog or a nice potted plant, it wouldn't be as funny. The author heightened the stakes by incorporating the large milestone of bringing home a baby as a grievance of an Amazon Echo.

Finally, we end the analysis with the most challenging of questions: “what could make this funnier?” Because comedy is subjective, there is no right or wrong answer. Comedy can be made better, and it can be made worse. Now that doesn't mean that we should indefinitely tinker with a joke, just that the possibility for improvement always exists.

- We could change the dialogue to play up the Amazon Echo's emotion.
 - A drawback is that this change could strip the headline of it's initial voice.
Something like “Oh please, I can do better!” loses the sassy tone of the Echo's initial “Oh was I not enough for you?”. Also, it makes the intention of the joke less clear. Was the Echo trying to be like a baby? No, that would be absurd, and maybe not in a funny way.
- Change the word “Asks” to something more serious. “Begs” or “shouts” inflicts more emotion into the Echo, but it might move the joke off the rails a bit. It might make it less real – would an Amazon Echo really be that dramatic? Wouldn't it lose its smooth, mechanical cool if it “begged” or “shouted”?

Analyzing comedy is a lot like the chicken and egg dilemma – you need to know comedy rules to recognize them when you analyze humor, but you need to analyze humor before you can get to

comedy rules. That is, unless you cheat and use a joke rule book. Which, sure, I have tried. But the most rewarding epiphanies came from my own analysis, rather than reading the rules someone got paid to put in a book.

Nonetheless, from that one analysis, we see a few rules begin to form. Relatability can make an absurdity funny. Anthropomorphizing an insentient object can be humorous. Incorporating dialogue can make something feel more real. Word choice is crucial, especially when the word count is limited. As you analyze more comedy, you come across new rules and old ones can reappear.

While the above two pages of analysis may seem a bit like overkill, in reality, the process speeds up the more acquainted you become with humor. Before typing this all out, I arrived at these conclusions in a minute or two. The practice becomes intuitive, more like pattern recognition. Similar themes and their exciting variations! Its neuroplasticity – your brain forms new neural connections based on new ways of thinking (Ackerman 2020).

You might also notice that by analyzing the 15-word headline, some of the spirit of the joke is lost. It's overkill. We killed the frog! So, if pulling apart comedy ever gets to be too much, just stop for a while. Take a hiatus. Rest that overworked comedy brain of yours and go solve a Rubik's cube.

FOUR THEORIES

To make analysis a bit easier, I'll do something rash and throw you a bone. There are four prevailing theories of comedy, but I only somewhat agree with about three of them. Each theory

is an attempt to answer why we find everything funny, but as you'll find, a catch-all explanation for the entirety of comedy doesn't appear possible. There is too much variability!

1. **Superiority Theory** – “The pleasure that we take in humor derives from our feeling of superiority over those we laugh at.” (D.H. Munro 1988). When taken to the extreme, this theory implies that we only laugh when we feel above or better than others, but I think it simply means that it's funny when other people mess up. For example, if a good friend trips, we might laugh at them before we help them up. Also, I'm quite the one for the occasional spoonerism (swapping the initial sounds of certain words), and my sisters don't let the conversation move forward until they laugh, make fun of me, and usually tell the other one if she's not currently present. For reference, I recently told them, “Wow, my hairs are quite leggy.”

Or maybe, superiority theory is a remnant of what comedy used to be; vaudeville comedians used slapstick and physical comedy to get quick laughs. But, even to this day we still see physical comedy, a great example being the burglar booby trap scenes in Home Alone.

(“Home Alone Booby Traps Scene”, 00:00:41 – 00:02:10)



Link to watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ddXUQu9RC4U>

Additionally, superiority might be an element of self-deprecating humor. When a comedian makes a joke about himself, the audience laugh at the comedian because in that moment they get a benign chance to look down on someone else.

But, a major downside to this theory is that it is not a catch-all, it is barely a catch-some. The *Home Alone* scene wouldn't be funny if the one's getting hurt weren't evil burglars. If someone had planted these traps to hurt innocent people, we wouldn't laugh. Even though we would still have a target to laugh at, it wouldn't feel as good. Further, the movie wouldn't be as funny if it wasn't a kid who had planned it all – imagine the main character of the movie being a 30-something year old web designer. Or if either of the burglars had died – that would be too grave. There are a lot of caveats to superiority, and so it alone is not enough.

2. **Relief Theory** – Laughter acts as a release of nervous energy. Similar to how a pressure cooker lets out air, relief theory suggests that nervous energy builds up within us and releases in the form of laughter. The thing that bothers me with this theory is that it does not clearly indicate how this nervous energy is built up, and it equates humor too closely to laughter. Can enough nervous energy build up to come out as laughter when we read a 15-word Onion headline? And if so, would we find this “funny” or just “laugh-worthy?” Also, does this nervous energy come from the comedy itself or does it naturally build up throughout the day? If so, why don't we just laugh randomly when too much nervous energy builds up? What is the correlation between humor and this energy?
- I think it would make more sense to see nervous energy as a comedic tactic, not an overall explanation to comedy. In the below example, stand-up comedian Tig Notaro

pushes a chair across a stage during a set on Conan O'Brien's show, and she relies on nervous energy to elicit laughs.

(“Tig Notaro Stand-Up 12/06/11”, 00:03:21 – 00:06:15)



Link to watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tNaXRADhvsM>

She does take a huge risk here, and so one could argue she's not really trying to be funny, just weird. However, even though she builds up nervous tension in the audience, and as a result, gets some laughs, I personally wouldn't label this as funny.

There is, however, something worthwhile about laughing as a method of relief. When a comedian pauses before the punchline, the joke becomes funnier than just robotically saying it. There's a sense of anticipation there, and along with it comes the relief of a completed thought. This reminds me a lot of jazz, and how dissonance is intentionally used to make the resolve sound all the sweeter. Although laughter is not common when listening to jazz music, I do agree that there is that sense of pressure and relief. If you introduce a paradox in comedy and then resolve it, either within that paradox or by increasing the time before the resolve, that thing becomes funnier.

3. **Incongruity Theory** – Bringing two contrasting ideas together and resolving them. A reconciliation of paradox. This is my favorite theory because I find it to be the most applicable. I have found that most everything that is funny has some element of incongruity to it. Whether that be the direct pairing of opposites, exaggeration, faulty logic, or even just the absurdity of a situation – some element of incongruity is almost everywhere in comedy. For example, in the Amazon Echo headline from earlier, the incongruous element would be comparing the insentient technology to a newborn baby. However, I have found that sometimes incongruity, although important, can simplify comedy too much. It is not just the incongruity that would make something funny, but how that core concept is communicated.
4. **Benign Violation Theory** – “Humor requires three conditions: (1) a situation that incorporates some sort of violation, (2) but the situation is benign, and (3) both perceptions occur simultaneously.” (Peter McGraw 2010). In this way, I would argue that benign violation is just a subcategory of incongruity theory – the violation and benign aspects are incongruous, and when they are resolved (or occur simultaneously), humor is the effect.

Here’s one of my favorite examples of Benign Violation Theory, and quite possibly one of my favorite stand-up sets of all time. This is Jerrod Carmichaels’ opening joke from his Just for Laugh’s Festival performance. I’ve indicated the level of laughter that followed each statement to demonstrate how he escalates the joke to the end, but I highly recommend you watch it for yourself! Carmichael is a master of pauses, so this is

also a great example that coincides with the discussion earlier on how rhetorical tension/release techniques help to deliver a punchline.

(“Jerrod Carmichael – I Will Definitely Cheat on My Wife”, 00:00:00 – 00:00:34)



Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LJlX3WKxxDk>

“I’m starting to be comfortable in Canada, [SMALL LAUGH] I’m not uncomfortable like I used to be. Canada used to scare me, you know. Canada’s a, it’s a nice place. And it’s almost... too nice. [SMALL LAUGH] You know what I mean? It’s like the quiet kid in theatre arts class. [BIGGER LAUGH] There’s a chance you could murder all of us. [THE BIG LAUGH] That’s a chance.” [RECOVERING LAUGHS]

Here Carmichael compares Canada’s nice reputation to a stereotype of *that* quiet kid in class. Although kids murdering other kids is quite the – um – unpleasant image, when incongruously compared to the nice stereotype of Canada, Carmichael imposes a benign violation. It is actually at the line that he introduces the benign violation that he gets his biggest laugh out of the joke. He reminds us of scary and violent notions, but it is a benign reminder. Nothing evil comes of it, and he does not linger on that evil too long. However, this reminder alone is not enough. I could

spend a paragraph writing about the calamities of war or even a pain as subtle as food poisoning and then juxtapose these against world peace or the yumminess of food, but that won't make you laugh. Even though it is a "benign violation", nothing about the plain, bad reminder itself is funny. Rather, it's that component effectively fused with an incongruous, yet truthful, comparison that would prod the audience to laugh in agreement.

EXAMPLES 2-6

While the four theories can help pinpoint a joke's premise, they are not indicative of the layers of nuance at play. For example – what about stylistic attributes like word choice? Or why it's important to end with a punchline? There's more to comedy than a number of rules less than the fingers on a good hand.

To help illustrate this point that there is more to comedy, here are a few more quick examples across media to show how you can answer "why was this funny?":

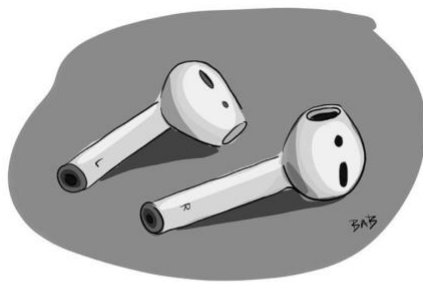
1. Instagram Post



(Kevin Barnett 2018)

- Core Concept: Coworkers got him the wrong cake and he finds this admirable.
 - Incongruity between how he's supposed to feel (disappointment) and what he feels (respect). Places a seriousness to something as trivial as the decision of the cake, as a way for his coworkers to make a "move" similar to a battle.
- Joke Specific Mechanics: Shows rather than tells us they got the wrong flavor – allows the viewer to realize the paradox on his own. He also saves the punchline for the end: "this is a move I can only respect."
- Wouldn't Be Funny: The joke would lose value if he had just plainly said "they got me the wrong cake" or didn't acknowledge that he admires their indifference to his preference.
- Make it Funnier: Show his coworkers smiling and presenting the vanilla cake. This would make it easier for the viewer to visualize the target of the joke. Or, he could have shown the piece of half-eaten cake thrown away in the trashcan; this would underscore how much he does not like vanilla cake.

2. New Yorker Cartoon



*"I lie awake at night in fear that one day
she'll get drunk and we'll never see
each other again."*

(Brooke Bourgeois 2019)

- Core Concept: Pair of air pods are afraid they'll be separated.
 - Incongruity: anthropomorphizes insentient objects – air pods can't have separation anxiety! Even further, the position of the right air pod actually makes it look like its lying on its back looking up at the sky, lost in thought.
- Relatability: air pods do come in pairs, so in that way are “meant for each other.”
- Joke Specific Mechanics: Owner getting drunk as the reason they separate is funnier than just her forgetting the Air Pods at the library or something. Because getting drunk is a silly grown-up thing to do – quite possibly an example of why superiority is funny. That this innate bond between headphones can be broken just because the owner was drunk.
- Make it funnier: By giving the owner a name (Alyssa or Karen or something) it would be more specific. This could help the scenario feel more real.

3. Improv Clip

(“Sentences [1X09]”, 00:00:12 – 00:05:20)



Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PUY4KGbKQms>

This is a clip from *Improvaganza*, a Las Vegas Casino show starring the cast of *Whose Line is it Anyway?* As a quick intro to improv, there are two main types: short form (which is seen in this clip) and long-form. Short-form tends to be a few minutes long, with a particular game or gimmick at the center of a scene. Here that gimmick is reading random sentences and incorporating them in a scene (it is further explained in the clip). On the other hand, long-form consists of 20-30 minute shows, with the performers left to their own devices. There is no “game”, it is just characters interacting in scenes on their own, intermixing a combination of separate stories. If you’re interested, here is my favorite example of long-form improv.

(“House of Lies Improv | Live with Kristen Bell, Don Cheadle, Ben Schwarz, John Lawson & More”, 00:02:48 – 00:06:40)



Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oh3zRZhwhSQ>

Within the 5-minute *Improvaganza* scene, there are several moments which are individually funny for their own reasons. And because of that, I will not be outlining here what makes improv and situational comedy funny (there is more on that in the next section). Rather, I will focus on the “game” of *Sentences* and why that structure is funny.

- Core Concept: Performers say random sentences in a live scene and have to find ways to incorporate them in.
- Incongruity – the sentences either do or don't match what was being said. If they don't match, it's funny to watch the character reconcile the randomness (for example “are there spinsters with benefits?”). If they do match, it is doubly as funny, because the incongruity of the random sentence and the scene at hand seem to magically reconcile on their own. For example, this occurs when the sentences “that is an odd smell” or “branding and castration” are read (for the sake of comedy, please excuse the foul implications).

4. TV Characters



(Family Guy 1999)

This screenshot has been saved on my computer for two years. That is how much I adore it.

- Core Concept: Stewie, a baby with an English accent, announces it is time to misbehave.
- Word Choice: “Time to be bad!” is much funnier than saying “Now I’m going to be bad” or “Time for me to behave badly.” Either for its brevity or how seriously it takes itself.

Also, it's just a weird phrase! No one says, "Time to be bad" – nobody announces this so openly. But because a kid says it, nonetheless a baby, this absurd remark innocently makes sense.

- Incongruity: babies aren't evil, but with his bad behavior and British accent (that no one else in his family has), Stewie has evil undertones. This incongruity is mirrored by how evil characters become funny when they act childish. Take Dr. Evil from *Austin Powers* or Mugatu from *Zoolander*. Both are silly, childish supervillains. Silly supervillains are character we often see in comedies because they are incongruous concepts, and in turn, quite funny.



(Austin Powers 1997)



(Zoolander 2004)

5. Joke in Class

A moment I'll never forget from my time at The University of Texas at Austin is when a professor complained about receiving chalk as a gift during class. After the chalk made a shrill sound on the chalkboard, he stopped writing, closed his eyes, and said, "I don't want to sound like an asshole... but please don't gift me chalk." After another solemn pause, he continued: "I have to order this special Japanese chalk that doesn't squeak." Sure, you had to have been there,

but I assure you most everyone laughed, and I even saw the guy in front of me write the whole thing down in tiny print at the top of his notebook.

- Core Concept: Professor (figure of authority) gets annoyed at chalk that isn't specially ordered from Japan. The intensity of his annoyance felt bizarre for what seemed like such a trivial preference.
- Joke Specific Mechanics: Closing his eyes and taking a pause heightened his disgust for the chalk. Using the specificity of "Japanese" chalk further conveyed the extent of his preference.
- Make it Funnier: if he had gotten madder, say, put his hand on his head, or thrown the chalk on the floor in anger, that would have heightened his disgust. But, how realistic would that have been? Sure, it would have been even more bizarre if his head turned red and popped out like a cartoon, but that couldn't have happened, so even in this hypothesizing reality it doesn't feel funny.
- Note about comedy in real life: I find that when funny things happen in real life (rather than in fiction/stand-up) – there are less levers to play with before you break reality. If you are too silly or dramatic when an audience is not expecting comedy, there's a kind of barrier that is broken. Thus, successful "real-life" humor tends to be subtler and more situational. It relies on absurdities that are realistic.

HITS AND MISSES

In addition to analyzing what makes good comedy funny, I suggest analyzing the misses as well. Not only because they will key you into what comedy rules are necessary, but instead because they provide valuable lessons on what not to do. You can really get a sense of how a good

premise is not enough on its own, and that it needs to be communicated effectively. Further, it's good practice to brainstorm ways to elevate the core idea the content was trying to get across. As a plus, the less-than-perfect tend to be more plentiful!

I recommend first analyzing the premise to pinpoint the intended incongruity. Next, I would make a list of reasons why the bit fell short and how you might improve it.

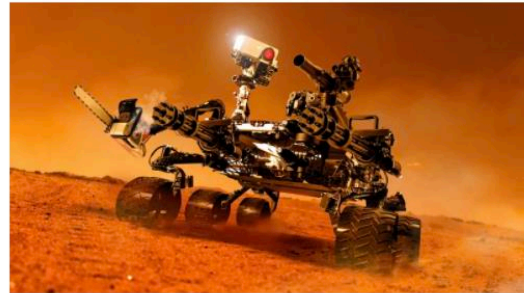
As usual, your examples:



NEWS

'Animal Crossing: New Horizons' Developers Confirm No One Can Hurt You Here, No One Can Make You Scared

(The Onion 2020)



NEWS IN BRIEF

NASA Launches Vengeance Rover To Pay Back Mars For Killing Opportunity Back In 2018

(The Onion 2020)

Animal Crossing Example

- Premise: Virtual world of *Animal Crossing* provides a safe haven from the dangers of the current reality (this is a headline released during the COVID-19 outbreak, so could reference that turmoil.)

- Bad: I understood the premise, but I didn't feel much of a kick. Sure, a virtual world can provide an escape from a coronavirus-laden reality, but so what? Here you have the truth but neither a sufficient incongruity nor utilization of comedy rules. It failed.
- Suggestion: Emphasize the absurdity of game developers trying to soothe players. Maybe for the picture, have the virtual avatar huddled in a corner or curled up in a fetal position. Maybe even lying face down on the grass. Just something more to drive home this point of despair.

NASA Example

- Premise: NASA launched a rover to get back at Mars for destroying a past rover. Yeah, I get it. It would be dumb for NASA to pick a fight with a planet but again, no kick.
- Bad: At first it was confusing because I didn't get that "Opportunity" was the name of the old rover, so it seemed that Mars had just killed NASA's opportunity. Confusion is the last thing you want – how can an audience appreciate a joke they don't understand? Also, how would launching another rover "pay back" Mars? Why would Mars even care?
- Suggestion: Place a greater emphasis on NASA being silly trying to battle a planet. Because they are the target of the joke here, right? We're laughing at NASA for picking a fight with a planet. Start the headline with "*In it to Win it*: NASA Launches Vengeance Rover to...." But you have to be careful when you thoroughly analyze a joke and then modify it. What if the audience doesn't share your subjective understanding – what if they're not keyed into the battle theme you've surmised? Take a break, come back. Ask a friend. Subjectivity is both a comic's greatest boon and nemesis.

In summary, to analyze like a comedian, you've got to engage like one. And the key to that is constantly asking why something is (or isn't) funny when the attempt is made. The quality of one's observations increases with the quality of the questions one asks. As you began to notice the possible levers there are to play around with – the subjects involved, the premise at hand, the stylistic decisions like word choice and phrasing, the world opens up with possibilities. There are simply so many things. So many ways to analyze and so many ways to find funny. It is on us to go forth and seek the humor out.

Now that you've been through the wringer, give the diagnostic another whirl:



NEWS Shared from Onion Gamers Network

Fascinating Lore: Nintendo Revealed That The Reason Mario Always Comes Back To Life After He Dies Is Because Both Heaven And Hell Reject His Soul

1. Why is this funny?
 - a) Core Concept
 - b) Joke Mechanics
2. What changes would make this less funny?
3. How can we make this funnier?

PART 1, SECTION B: TRUTH

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE: DEFINE ‘TRUTH’

Before we can fully appreciate how truth is used in comedy, we have to better understand what truth is. In a literal, lexicon sense, truth is defined as “the body of real things, events, and facts” (Merriam-Webster 2020). But in this case, is truth universal or subjective? There are so many different types of truths – inner truths, universal truths, empirical truths – which one could possibly apply to comedy? Even further – how does one incorporate truth into a performance – and what type of truth is that?

When I think of truth in comedy, I refer to elements that can ground humor. A lot of comedy is contrived – think back to the headlines from *The Onion* I referenced earlier in the paper. An Amazon Echo didn’t actually feel bad when a baby was brought home. In a literal sense, there is no truth to that statement! The writer doesn’t expect you to believe that it happened, and in fact, the absurdity of the joke rests on the reality that it couldn’t. The underlying implications, however, are “truths.” These include a distrust of the growing power of technology, an increased reliance on home devices, and the significance of bringing a baby home for the first time. Comedy makes sense because there is a shared bank of knowledge that we can relate to. Even if one hasn’t yet experienced those “truths,” most are aware of them. A piece of humor can’t achieve funny if its audience doesn’t comprehend the truth mechanics it plays with. So, in that sense, “truth in comedy” relates to the act of grounding humor in shared knowledge. It is relatability – an interwoven web of facts shared from participating in the human experience.

To illustrate this point, I present a few memes from the Facebook group Subtle Curry Traits. It's an online group made by and for first-generation Indian-Americans. It's a space for members to relate and laugh about the incongruities of our colliding cultures (and mostly, to make fun of our parents). Subtle Curry Telugu Traits is an even more specific group, catering to those Indian-Americans whose parents speak Telugu.

Subtle Curry Traits Example:



(Subtle Curry Traits 2019)

If you are not familiar with Indian culture, the truth this joke rests on is not very evident. Many Indian kids at one time or another (from Sunday school or stories from their parents) learn that yogis use stars to predict the future and perform certain rituals to potentially change and improve a situation. Because the American book and film *The Fault in our Stars* implies that certain

elements of one's life are fixed and "written in the stars," it's funny to see this juxtaposed against a differing Indian belief. It is a perfect representation of the two cultures colliding, and the reconciliation that comes out in the form of humor, here as a unique Indian-American paradox.

Subtle Telugu Traits Example:

When your son's name is Govinda & he
is lost in Thirupathi crowd..



(Subtle Telugu Traits 2019)

This one's a bit more specific. Thirupathi is a city in southern India that is predominantly Telugu-speaking. There is a large temple here, known for its huge crowds and general chaos. In the temple whenever someone says the name "Govinda," a call and response is initiated and people respond by saying "Govinda" back. Thus, this meme shows that unfortunate scenario in which one would not be able to find a lost Govinda, given the particular practice of that particular location. It is such a niche joke. Sure, most could relate to the pain of losing a son, but not the despair of losing a *Govinda* in a *Thirupathi* crowd. Further, this meme template is mostly

used in non-Indian scenarios (in this meme the religious symbol on the forehead was added on), so seeing this variation further grounds the incongruity.

ALL-KNOWING IS NOT ENOUGH

In both of these examples, we see that in order to get the incongruity of the joke, one must know the truth that is being built upon. I'm not implying that knowing everything would make all jokes funny. As we've seen earlier, even if a joke has incongruity and truth, it can still miss its mark. It still needs to be communicated effectively.

Instead, I use these jokes to underscore the importance of knowing your audience. The recipients of humor don't necessarily have to agree with the mentioned truth, but they need to be aware of it. If we think back to the Amazon Echo example, to get the joke, you don't have to believe that technology is taking over our lives, but you need to be aware that the feeling exists. The need for shared knowledge helps to explain why certain examples of humor can't translate across cultures. Even if we translate the words, there are certain deeper, societal truths that must be fully understood before they can be parodied. In this way, the societal truths comedy plays upon are not universals; they simply exist. Not really as facts or beliefs, but more loosely as "things we've come across."

To help visualize truth in comedy, I like to think of the audience swimming in an ocean of absurdity, all huddled together, holding onto a life saver that is connected to your boat. You want the audience to submerge in the incongruities and absurdities because that's where much of the comedy is, but you need them to hold onto the life line or they won't be tethered to anything. They would feel too lost to enjoy themselves.

However, truth is used quite differently depending on the particular medium you are referring to. I explore these differences in discussing truth in stand-up, television, improv comedy, sketch comedy, short stories, and joking around with friends.

RICHARD PRYOR: A PATRON SAINT

To illustrate why truth is so important to stand-up comedy, I'll first need to give a mini history lesson. It involves the realization of Richard Pryor, one of the greatest stand-up comedians of all time; "the patron saint of stand-up as truth-telling" (Logan 2015).

The year was 1967, and Richard Pryor had a sold-out show at the Aladdin Hotel in Las Vegas. At the time, his routine mainly consisted of clean, mainstream jokes, similar to the Bill Cosby-esque standard of the time. After walking on stage, however, he stepped up to the mic and asked, "What the fuck am I doing here?" and walked right off. The comedian later describes this moment as an 'epiphany' (Logan 2015). His content didn't feel right – it felt like a mock of what he was supposed to be talking about, not how he truly felt. It was through this realization that he concluded, "comedy – real comedy – wasn't only tellin' jokes. It was about telling the truth" (Haggins 2007). Pryor, alongside Lenny Bruce and George Carlin, are credited with turning stand-up on its head (Brownfield 1999). Comedy was no longer about making people laugh, but about presenting truth and observation and showcasing reality that would in its own absurdity cause people to laugh. In fact, Pryor's effect on comedy was so significant that he was the first recipient of the Mark Twain Prize for American Humor. Further, when talking about Richard Pryor's impact on comedy, Dave Chappelle commented, "The mark of greatness is when everything before you is obsolete, and everything after you bears your mark" (Inside the Actor's Studio 2006).

Truth in comedy is so important because it elevates the definition of humor. Comedy is no longer a lucky concoction that triggers a laugh, but a reflection of something more integral to the human experience. This revelation further distinguished humor from laughter. Comedy becomes more about a genuine connection between creator and receiver. And to the comic, the success of one's material is no longer just in how you say it, but what you say. Not just about how many people laugh at your joke, but how they feel about it. As a result, there's a greater element of personal choice on what material you as a comic decide to focus on.

STAND-UP COMEDY: STARTING WITH TRUTH

You might be thinking – if truth is necessary in comedy, before Richard Pryor had his Las Vegas epiphany, he must have been using truth anyway. He had to have been – he sold out that Las Vegas crowd, so the audience must have resonated with his “Pryor” (prior – I ask you to forgive me, I could not resist) content. So even when he was doing Bill Cosby-inspired humor, he must have been using some element of truth! That's true, but he wasn't basing his material on *his* truth. He was doing stand-up on material he thought the audience wanted to hear. His epiphany made him realized that while his Cosby-like material resonated with an audience, he himself didn't resonate with it. Following Pryor's transformation and resulting success, comedians took note that multiple kinds of truth can connect with an audience, not just the niceties and clean one-liners. Simply, that a variety of styles could be successful. This encouragement of the individual voice opened the floodgates – there was no longer a standardization of the American comic.

This push for individuality makes stand-up my favorite kind of comedy. It is the one platform that allows an individual to truly, genuinely be themselves. A stand-up comedian stands

alone on a stage, equipped only with his or her ideas, facing an expecting audience. It is for that reason that individual or subjective truth is so integral to stand-up comedy.

Stand-up is unique in that the comedian directly talks to an audience. As a result, stand-up comics tend to talk more about their personal observations rather than create a fictional scenario. In other words, when creating, they start with a truth and build a bit around it. For example, if we think back to Carmichael's Canada joke, his initial observation is that Canada is a nice place, almost eerily so. He creates a bit around it by comparing it to "that nice kid in theatre-arts class." Below I've included a few examples that depict how a stand-up comedian uses truth. They build around it; their observation-based approach roots reality as the foundation of their material.

Further, I've found that there are two main ways that truth is used in stand-up: (1) pointing out an absurd fact of life and (2) injecting funny into a plain truth.

1. A Funny Truth (these are often one-liners)

- a. Jerrod Carmichael in 8: "The only thing weirder than finding out your father has a second family, is finding out you guys are that second family" (Carmichael 2017).
- b. Hasan Minhaj in *Homecoming King*: He describes how his father decided to marry his mom without even seeing her just because her family owned a camera – "In ten minutes, the man married a woman he had never laid eyes on. You understand? That's Tinder with no photos" (Minhaj 2017)
- c. Demetri Martin – "Employee of the month is a good example of how somebody can be both a winner and a loser at the same time" (Martin 2009).

These true statements are all funny because there is an intrinsic, incongruous element in them. It is through the truth that these sentences are funny. We realize that there is juxtaposition all around us.

2. Make a Truth Funny

- a. Dave Chappelle in *Killin' Them Softly*: One of the jokes in this special is about Chappelle seeing a baby by itself outside the projects. His truth here is that living in the projects is a dangerous thing. He illustrates this point by including an absurd story about a baby being out in the streets at 3AM trying to sell drugs. The baby's justification? "I got kids to feed!" (Chappelle 2000). Most likely this did not happen, but rather, it's an exaggeration built on his observation that public housing is a dangerous place to live. He artificially injects absurdity to illustrate a truth.

A stand-up's reliance on truth seems pretty straightforward, doesn't it? This medium is about an individual's observations, so naturally it would be centered on reality and relatable facets. But, what about made-up comedy? What about television shows or sketch comedy? These stories are manifested and contain fictional characters; can truth exist there? Or even in improvisational comedy, in which the content is made up on the spot? Of course, all these questions are rhetorical, and the answer is as plain as a Jane yes. Even fiction maintains a certain element of truth to it, albeit in a slightly different form.

TELEVISION: MAKING THE DRAB, FAB

Many sitcoms of today are centered on common, boring situations of life. For example, *The Office* is about working at a paper company, *Parks and Recreation* is about just that – working at a Parks and Recreation Department, *Community* follows a community college study group, and *Superstore* is about working at a superstore (that’s it, that’s the premise). These are all very basic, very mundane situations that many of us can relate to – working 9-to-5 jobs, day in, day out. Why then, do we give time to watch these shows that replicate reality? It is simply because they do not. These shows take that everyday element as a premise, and inject it with unlikely subsidiaries: a wacky cast of coworkers, bizarre and comical situations, witty dialogue. The writers pair the truth of a mundane existence with the incongruity of absurd characters and scenarios.

There is a good counter point to be made here, and I hope you’ve come to it before I do. It is that all comedies are not about everyday life. Take *Rick and Morty* for example. The show follows a mad scientist and his grandson on their inter-galactic space travels. Where’s the truth there? Before I explain, I would like you to watch a clip from the show:

(“Roy: A Life Well Lived | Rick and Morty”, 00:00:00 – 00:02:30)



Link to watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=szzVlQ653as>

In the scene, the two play a virtual reality simulation of a typical life. Sure, the duo is in outer space and such a high-speed simulation doesn't exist, so at first glance there doesn't seem to be much truth there. But if you look closely enough there are elements that tether the scene to something we can relate to. For example, the two play a game simulating life, and each makes different choices. Even within the simulation itself, we see common tropes – chasing one's dreams, having to settle down, health scares, etc. These realities of everyday life aren't so interesting on their own, but when packed into an intergalactic arcade simulation, they have more potential. And thus, although the show operates in a different dimension (quite literally), by incorporating these tropes of everyday life, the show grounds itself throughout.

GROUNDING IN SKETCH COMEDY

There are many moving parts in a sketch – the cast of characters, the style of dialogue, set pieces, visual cues, timing, etc. – I do not mean to imply that truth is the key to perfectly coordinating all of them. Often sketches are fun because they don't follow truth. Instead, they provide an escape from the rationally-confined reality. However, if a sketch goes too off the rails, and it completely ignores what should be happening, it's no longer funny. It loses that sense of grounding. It becomes pure incongruity, and loses its sense of truth. The two must coexist to some degree, or you lose the audience. To see an example, I encourage you to watch this SNL sketch, especially because I will be referencing it later on as well.

(“Birthday Party”, 00:00:00 – 00:05:16)



Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ruxBibhbD6o>

The incongruity here is that the young girl Melanie is overt with her crush on her friend's dad. Although this is an absurd situation, the sketch is grounded because the friends are grossed out and the father denies the advance and tries to quiet her down (to no avail). These are natural, grounded responses. If the dad had not been weirded out, the sketch would have lost its sense of truth and wouldn't be as funny. In creating these fake situations, we must pick and choose which elements are absurd, because we can't overturn everything. If we do, we leave the audience stranded out in the sea, detached from the life line.

THE PROBLEM WITH MONTY PYTHON

If you tip the scales too much toward the absurd, you may run the risk of what the sketch show *Monty Python's Flying Circus* often does – opt for an unhealthy portion of absurdity. Although chaos can be funny, I find that many of their sketches are misses simply because they are not grounded in reality. They are too absurd. Many of the die-hard Monty Python fans might disagree, but this could be because they are fully aware of

the absurd realm of Monty Python and thus enter their viewing experience with this frame of reference. The world of Monty Python becomes a different one in that sense; it is a world that accepts absurdity as one of its truths.

IMPROVISATIONAL COMEDY: HONEST DISCOVERY

The best book I've read about truth in improv is a book called *Truth in Comedy* by Del Close and Charna Halpern, founding figures of long-form improv. The book emphasizes that the way to make situational comedy funny is not through jokes (a set-up, punchline structure), but rather by rooting the elements of a scene in truth. Two of the best quotes from the book are:

- “The truth is funny. Honest discovery, observation, and reaction is better than contrived invention.”
- “Where do the really best laughs come from? Terrific connections made intellectually, or terrific revelations made emotionally.”

When creating a scene from scratch in improv, we also create its reality – the characters, their relationships and history, the setting, the problem, etc. As a result, it is the improviser's responsibility to maintain this created reality as the truth, and referencing it bolsters the validity of the scene. Take the *Improvaganza* scene I mentioned earlier. The players in the scene start out with nothing, save the audience suggestion of a soap opera's title and location. The beginning of a scene is crucial because it is here that improvisers create the foundation for this fictional reality. For example, the scene starts with a shower, and it is no mistake that this shower is revisited multiple times throughout the 5-minute scene. By revisiting the introduction, the performers reinforce a previously established “truth” of the scene. Further, when improvisers sprinkle in something relatable into a scene, it brings relatable truth into this absurd fiction that is

being created before an audience's eyes. An example of this is the line: "Oh yeah, I'm not supposed to walk around the house 'nude.'" This scene choice mimics the banter married couples might have, referring to a couple's quibbles about what behavior is and isn't allowed. The audience acknowledges a variation of something they've seen before. From *Truth in Comedy*: "The audience laughs at agreement – a secret of comedy that very few people realize."

STORIES THAT ARE SHORT

Humor short stories use truth very similarly to improv and sketch comedy. For that reason, there aren't any new lessons in this segment, I've just included this example in case you were interested. Here, I reference my favorite piece from the *Harvard Lampoon*, *Last Day at the Zoo* (2017).

Link: <https://www.harvardlampoon.com/piece/last-day-at-the-zoo/>

As the zookeeper recounts his last day at the zoo, he reminisces over his "curb-stomping" practices. His tone mirrors that of a prison guard, and it is in that incongruity that we find the truth. Mistreating animals on its own isn't funny, but the fact that a zookeeper is doing it so blatantly reminds of us similar relationships we have seen between a violent guard and his prisoners. Seeing this truth in an incongruous way makes it funny.

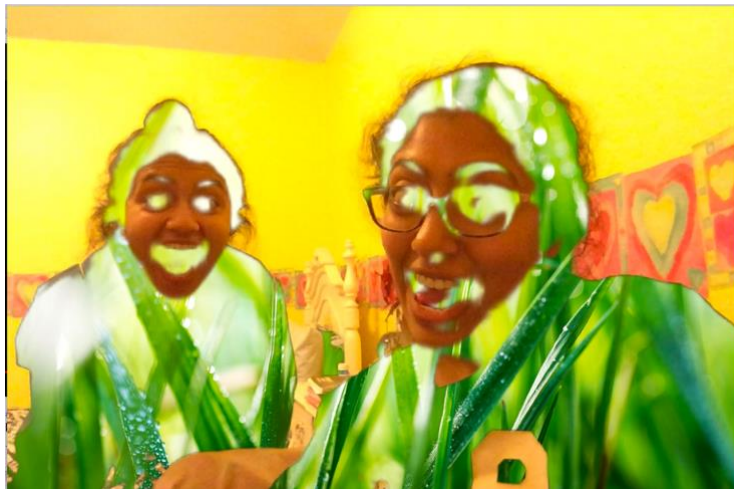
Two other truths you might notice are gorillas being regarded as intelligent animals and the nostalgia associated with (voluntarily) leaving a job.

COMEDY IN THE EVERYDAY

By “comedy in the everyday” I refer to the natural situations and circumstances that make us laugh in their own merit. There are two main categories within everyday humor – situational and conversational.

Primarily, situational comedy occurs in the moment. No one is trying to be funny. Rather, the world puts forth a situation that naturally combines truth and incongruity.

A recent example of situational comedy:



This is a picture my sister and I took because my Zoom Virtual Backgrounds replaces the people instead of the actual background. I honestly have no idea how. Regardless, we thought it was funny, and I hope you do too. The incongruity here is that the visual background does not appear as it should, and the truth is that it actually happened. Comedy in real life, in essence, is something that wasn't supposed to happen but just does. Sure, not every mishap is funny, but a large portion of the benign ones are. Next time you find yourself laughing in the “real world,” I encourage you to ask yourself why – and what, if anything, was contrived. What makes naturally

occurring, situational humor exciting is that we can't plan for it. It just happens for us and we get to enjoy the comedy when it appears.

As for conversational comedy, I refer to joking around with friends or funny comments people make. "When we're relaxing, we don't have to entertain each other with jokes. And when we're simply being ourselves up to each other and being honest, we're usually funniest."

This is another quote from *Truth in Comedy*, and I find that it sums up the best reason why joking with friends feels so good. Even if we're trying to make the others laugh, we're doing it for them – for us. There's an element of genuineness here. No one is getting paid to be funny, and no one is analyzing what humor levers to pull. Friends just sit around and have fun.

I show two examples here for you to better understand what exactly I mean by conversational humor. However, sharing these moments needs to be followed by a hearty helping of "you had to have been there."

Walking on a Bridge in Minneapolis

- Once I was walking with two of my friends and one guy made a weird noise. The other guy said, "ooh I liked that noise. Say it again?" And he did. And then he said, "one more time?" and he did. And then he said, "backwards now?" and he didn't.

I study comedy, and I still hold onto that weird interaction as one of the funniest things I've heard. Why? I don't get it. It's even hard to break that bit apart. What's the truth – that he made a funny noise and my friend liked it so much he wanted to hear it backwards, an impossible feat? How is that even funny?

An Obnoxious Ringtone

- Another friend of mine did this silly thing where he kept replaying his over-the-top Dr. Dre ringtone and dancing to it during a party. This one really stumps me. Why is obnoxious dancing funny? Maybe because his ring tone was silly, and that peculiarity is enough. And then dancing to it further elaborates and escalates that disparity? I'm at a loss!

Even typing these out the moments don't seem as funny, and I was actually there. Personally, I find analyzing and imagining new instances of everyday comedy the hardest. It is the least contrived, and thus the hardest to contrive. When we are not expecting funny, our rules for humor change – we expect something subtler. With everyday comedy, we are more familiar with the people and situations, and so we have less tolerance for absurdity before engaging in disbelief.

THE SECRET TO COMEDY: RECONCILIATION OF PARADOX

The greatest answer I've ever heard to "why is something funny?" came from Dave Chappelle. He described that, "'I was talkin' to a guy... he basically said to me that comedy is a reconciliation of paradox...And I think that that was an irreconcilable moment for me'" (CBS News 2018). I love this phrase "reconciliation of paradox" because I think it best sums up two core pillars of comedy – incongruity and truth. I've been hinting at it for a while now, but there it is. For a piece of humor to work, truth and incongruity are the keys to the recipe. The ingredients for the lock. A piece of humor needs elements that both make and not make sense.

A FEW OBSERVED RECONCILIATIONS

To illustrate the reconciliation of paradox, I present a few absurd observations I've made. The first is the bizarre activity that is doing puzzles. The paradox (for me at least) is that people spend hours putting together tiny oddly shaped pieces to form a picture they already have. Why spend all that time creating an image you already know exists? Further, this is an unrequired activity, no one is forcing you to do it. Simply: the paradox is that putting together puzzles seems like an unnecessary, arduous task, and the reconciliation is that people do them anyway. The paradox exists, but it is reconciled through its truth.

Below are a few other observations I've made that exhibit a reconciliation of paradox. A plus side to thinking like a comedian is that you spontaneously begin to catch incongruities around you. At times, this provides comic relief from the mundane day-to-day. And at others, you begin to overanalyze unnecessary and trivial facets of existence.

An observation about an element of society: Memorial Benches

What a rude thing to do, to honor someone who passed by creating a bench in their name. I wonder what that person who passed might think whenever someone takes a seat. "Oh, I'm sorry, did living life strain your legs? Here, come sit and relax on this bench funded by my death."

Observation from a personal experience: Amber Alert During Trivia

At a New Year's party with 10 or so families, we were playing a trivia game. As time was running out and tensions were rising, a loud shrill sound came from everyone's phones. It was an Amber Alert. Instantaneously, and almost annoyed, all the adults in the

room turned off the alarm without second-thinking. I thought it was interesting how adults, the supposed moral compass to their kids, bypassed an alert regarding a kidnapped child because they were too invested in a trivia(1) game.

But if you really sat and thought about the situation, their reactions made sense – how could the adults save the lost child? Would we have all piled in a car and kept our eyes peeled for that license plate and girl described in the alert? Shouting her name out the windows as the houses around us rang in the new year? Still, disregarding the logos of the joke, by distilling a nuanced situation we can bring to light an interesting incongruity.

THERE ARE SO MANY TRUTHS

There are so many ways. Period. If we have a thing, whether that be a physical object or purely an observation, there are so many different ways to take that thing in, and so many ways to communicate that thing out; so many truths, and so many creations. The improvisational comedy show *Whose Line is it Anyway* even has a recurring segment that employs this very practice. The segment is simply called Props, and in it the improvisers find many different ways to interpret one object that they are given, and indicate these different uses only with one line of dialogue.



(“Whose Line: Robin Williams Props”, 00:00:25 – 00:01:45)

Link to watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tE9NmXpXfLs>

As an example, in one episode they interpreted two bathroom mats as dogs, pom-poms, Cruella de Vil wigs, car wash cleaners, Rumba sleeves, a hairy back, etc. These different variations are all forms of truth; when positioned correctly, the bath mat does in fact resemble these objects. And these aren't even all of the possible interpretations – who's to say how many more exist?

But it is not only that they assigned this one physical object such a wide variety of identities, but also that in communicating these identities, there are infinite ways to do so. And here's the kicker: some ways are funnier, or simply better, than others. For example, when conveying that the bathroom mat was a dog, rather than plainly saying "This is a dog!", Robin Williams exclaims "Sit!" This shows rather than tells, a powerful communication tool. It is much more effective at landing the joke than directly telling an audience what to observe.

In this way, both the interpretation and presentation of comedy shines light on the endless possibilities that exist. Robin Williams could have picked another phrase clueing you into the mat's "dog-ness," such as "Shake!" or "Who's a good boy?" Considering this burden of choice is a sort of magical thinking. It forces you to realize that how we observe the world shouldn't be a given, even if the objects themselves are. Observations pass through us, but we can manipulate how they are perceived by others. It is this skill that we focus on next: how do we create for others?

PART 1, SECTION C: CREATE

THE NAUSEA OF CREATION

Creating content is the hardest part about thinking like a comedian. When you analyze comedy, you find that the core elements are always the same: incongruity, truth, and their reconciliation. With creation, however, even if you have that foundation, you still have to get that message across. You have to pick the right words, decide how to order your phrases. The abundance of choices is overwhelming; nauseating almost.

For example, let's refer to the bit I mentioned previously – people expend energy putting puzzles together even though they already know the end result. (Sure, you could argue that the act of putting that puzzle together is what makes it fun, but for now, let's simply focus on this facet). How do we take that apparent truth and make it funny? If you write a headline, what 15 or so words do you pick to convey that sentiment? Do you directly say that statement, or do you imply it in some way? Or, if you make that into a stand-up bit, how do you introduce that? Is it a one-liner, or do you specifically mention seeing family members frustratingly pour energy into a menial task? If this is a sketch, how do we escalate people getting frustrated about making a puzzle (if we even make the sketch about that specifically?). Is the height of the sketch's escalation them throwing the puzzle into the air, or is it more violent – banging their heads on the table and lighting the house on fire? In creating comedy, at every turn there are so many choices to make. It is that utter freedom that can destabilize one to stick to analysis.

This abundance of choice reminds me of a quote by the existentialist philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre: “Man is condemned to be free” (Sartre 10). At first, the extent of one's freedom is

exciting! We are constantly making choices, and as a result, it appears our sense of control is limitless. However, similar to creating in comedy, the unlimited extent of this choice can be off-putting. We decide everything, so we must decide everything. I hope that makes sense. Looking at this paper in a similar fashion – every word becomes a choice; every sentence, every example, even the order of the paragraphs. Even without deliberately making a choice, a choice is made; “I must know that if I do not choose, that is still a choice” (Sartre 44).

A SOLUTION: STRUCTURE AND TECHNIQUE

So, where do we go from here, timidly facing the monstrosity of infinite choice that looms behind the desire to create? There are two methods that help to assuage this nausea.

The first is to make some big choices. In making grander, overall decisions, we structure and give a goal to our smaller decisions. For example, think about making a general schedule or to-do list for the day. Rather than deciding at each minute what to do, in creating those umbrella decisions at the onset, you structure your day. Likewise, when creating a paper, by outlining at the beginning the major sections, you decide the intended outcomes of your smaller choices. Thus, when you create content, by deciding the piece’s message and overall structure, making those tiny choices along the way become much easier. They are no longer completely free; they now have intention. Many types of comedy already employ such a structure to them, such as the setup-punchline format of a joke or the three-act structure of television shows.

The second method is to familiarize yourself with comedic techniques. Understanding the tricks of the trade can help inform the decisions and choices you make while creating content – the kind of dialogue to include, the characters, the strength of the incongruity. Although we’ve established that a reconciliation of paradox is important to humor, achieving funny is knowing

how to communicate that paradox. It is knowing the abundance of choices that lay in front of you and how to expertly decide what to do when. Technique marks the difference between making your joke kill and killing your joke.

Because the structure and message of a piece largely depends on that specific creation, I can't help you much with method number one. However, that is not the case for method number two. Earlier I mentioned how one could "cheat" by using a comedy rule book instead of coming to these comedy rules through one's own analysis. Well, here's my list, for your reference. Below I've compiled my favorite comedy rules. Or maybe, these aren't "rules" per say, but "general best practices that apply most of the time." I could go through all 20 or so of them and painstakingly prove each one, but they can't really be proven. These are just techniques I've come across enough times to believe in. This is your cheat sheet. I divide them into comedy and rhetoric rules, the first focusing on how to make something funny and the latter about how to communicate effectively to an audience.

I'll refer to previous examples when I can, but I encourage you to be mindful of these techniques when you watch a show or come across comedy in your day to day.

COMEDY RULES

- **Callbacks/Running Gags** - Referencing something that happened earlier. The callback does not have to be funny on its own, but it is funny in association to that previous thing.
 - Example: In the *Improvaganza* clip from earlier, at 2:06 they establish "that is an odd smell" and at 4:40 the man gags in reference to that.

Improvaganza Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PUY4KGbKQms>

- **Rule of Threes** – Often considered a golden rule in comedy, and it has many implications. One interpretation is the number of times a running gag can appear before it is overplayed. Often, the third time is the most elaborate or the big kicker.
 - Example: In the SNL sketch “Birthday Party,” the girl in the sketch says, “Do you like that Mr. Dilham?” three times, each one an escalation of the previous. The final iteration happens after she slams on the table and has cake all over her face.
SNL Sketch Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ruXBibhbD6o>
- **Escalation** – Introduce the joke but leave the greatest escalation for the end.
 - Example: In “Birthday Party,” Melanie escalates how she shows her crush for Mr. Dilham. At first, she simply describes how attractive he is. Later on, however, we see that she brought him underwear, and finally we see her run across the room and literally smash herself against a table, getting cake all over her face. Imagine if the order of these events were flipped – it would feel awkward and off.
- **Double Down** - Adding more to a joke to drive it home (not just stopping at the premise).
 - Example: In “Birthday Party,” at 1:45 Melanie calls herself a “dirty girl” and her friends all double down on the extent of her poor hygiene by further elaborating.
- **Reversal/Shock/Surprise** – Going against expectations; when the audience thinks you will finish a phrase/items in a series in a certain way, and you subvert their expectations. This occurs because the audience is one step ahead of whatever you’re saying or showing them; by reversing the ending you surprise them.

- Example: *“When I was a kid my parents used to tell me, ‘Emo, don’t go near the cellar door!’ One day when they were away, I went up to the cellar door. And I pushed it and walked through and saw strange, wonderful things, things I had never seen before, like... trees, grass, flowers, the sun... that was nice...” — Emo Philips (E=MO2 1985).*
- **Obscure the Joke** - This is an understated rule in comedy but one that I think is very important. Sometimes, when you don’t directly say what’s funny about something and let the audience realize it on their own, it becomes funnier. This relates to showing and not telling your audience what to observe. Allowing the viewer to piece the parts together makes it funnier to them.



(Subtle Curry Traits 2019)

- This meme doesn’t directly tell you that the two moving pieces come together to form a heart, but when you realize it, the joke (about Indian people being extra and over the top at weddings) becomes all the funnier.
- Another example: in the Robin Williams *Whose Line is it Anyway* scene, at 0:36, rather than plainly say “Look, a dog!” Williams says “Sit.” The

audience realizes on their own that it is a dog, rather than being told what to see. That buffer creates anticipation, heightening the release.

- **Anthropomorphize** – Giving an insentient being emotion or human qualities.
 - Example: From earlier, the Amazon Echo felt insufficient to a child and Air Pods wondered if they might be separated one day – two very human insecurities.
- **Heighten the Stakes** – A great way to make a joke or premise funnier is to heighten the incongruity or the wrongness of something. That’s why in a lot of TV shows, you’ll see a small problem that the characters started out with transform into something much greater.
- **The Right Details** – When saying a joke about an experience, it’s important to be specific, but just about the right details. For example, in stand-up, if you’re telling a story there’s no way to bring back every single detail of that moment (the weather, what you were wearing, what exactly was said). So, it’s important to bring to light the right details, the specific elements that make that story funny.
- **Word Choice** – similar to picking the relevant details to mention, word choice is about picking the right words to convey a particular message.
 - Example: earlier we discussed the word choice in the Amazon Echo headline, and why “Asks” might be better suited than “Shouts” or “Begs.”

- **Poke Fun at Authority** – Making fun of those in charge is funny because it plays on an ingrained power dynamic. This can be seen in satire or political cartoons. Likewise, many of the bosses in the sitcoms – The Office, Parks and Rec, and Superstore – tend to be sillier than the bosses we find most often in reality.
- **Finding Different Ways to Say the Same Thing** – This is an example of showing not telling. Rather than explicitly stating something, its funnier when you imply it because there is more creativity there.
 - Example: “Birthday Party”: Melanie is alluded to being gross in several ways – she takes a shower by “peeing and getting right out,” gives “her whole class ringworm,” and sucks on her toe in the backseat of a car. Rather than repeating “Melanie is a dirty girl,” the sketch varies the description.
- **There are No Comedy Rules!** - Why, this is the most frustrating and exciting rule of them all. There is no ironclad formula to humor, and I bet a counterexample could be found for each of the rules mentioned above. But, in a way, this also presents an exciting challenge: if we were to consider these best practices as truths, wouldn’t the greatest incongruity be to achieve humor by breaking these rules?

RHETORIC RULES

- **Pauses** – Can increase anticipation, similar to pressure/release of the Relief Theory. In jazz, it’s often said that the silence is just as important as the notes themselves. Likewise,

in comedy, having moments of rest in between your dialogue allow the bit to feel more natural and also can help to increase anticipation.

- Example: Jerrod Carmichael's set; notice how he pauses before a punchline.

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LJIX3WKxxDk>

- **Specificity** – Including details lets the audience better imagine what you communicate.
 - Example: in-class joke I mentioned about chalk, the professor said he needs “Japanese chalk” rather than just any “chalk.” This joke underscores how particular and sensitive he is about his chalk.
- **Using Metaphors and Similes** – Compare two incongruous elements that share something in common – in essence, a reconciliation of paradox. Who knew we learned about comedy in English class?
- **End with the Punchline** - The ordering of the elements of a joke are important. By saving the punchline for the end, you save the best for last. Also, in doing so, you leave room for the set-up at the beginning.
 - Example: ordering of words in the Amazon Echo headline; the headline ends with “bringing new baby home.” Also, in the cake Instagram post, the caption ends with “This is a move I can only respect,” the funniest part of the post.
- **Use Action Words** – Words pack a greater punch if they are present and active. This makes the content of the joke harder hitting; the nouns are seen as modes of action rather

than just objects. Science author Steven Pinker knowingly provides an example: “let verbs be verbs. ‘Appear’ not ‘make an appearance’ (Jones 2019).

- **Intonation** – To be honest, I’m not completely sure what this word exactly means? I refer to it as choosing how to talk like a human. Its more than just bypassing a robotic voice; intonation involves how we both space out and hold onto our words.
 - Jerrod Carmichael often describes that instead of studying other stand-up comedians, he preferred to analyze famous public speakers like Steve Jobs or Martin Luther King Jr. This is because his comedy is more about making and illustrating points to an audience, rather than delivering a surface-level punchline.
- **Logos** – The argument that you make needs to have logical sense. If an audience member can find a counterargument or a detail that you might not have addressed, they spend more time analyzing that instead of listening to the point you’re trying to make.
 - Example: Amber Alert/Trivia scenario I mentioned earlier. Although the incongruity exists (playing a trivia game instead of searching for the missing girl), a reader might fixate on the fact that the adults at the party understood they couldn’t realistically do much, and that’s why they ignored the alert.
- **Conviction + Confidence** – If you don’t write confidently, perform confidently, and believe in your joke, who will?
 - Here is a quote by Steve Martin, from his memoir *Born Standing Up*: “Another rule was to make the audience believe that I thought I was fantastic, that my

confidence could not be shattered. They had to believe that I didn't care if they laughed at all, and that this act was going on with or without them" (Martin 116).

- **Likability** – It's easier for people to find you funny if they like you. This is often referred to as getting the audience on your side.
 - Example: In his stand-up special, Mitch Hedberg goes on and on about how his performance depends on his likability: "All right, man. I gotta do a half-hour. You gotta like me more than that." And as the special progresses he continues, "I'm just trying to be likable up here now. I have to be likable., It's all about likability, really." Towards the end, when he feels like he has the audience on his side, he wishes, "I think you like me more now than earlier. So I'm gonna redo my special" (Hedberg 1999).
- **Brevity** – Audiences, like all social entities, only have so much patience. If you take too long to say something, a reader runs out of patience. Plus, if you can say something, or the point you're trying to get across, or just a general idea you're trying to convey to someone else in fewer words, why not do that and save time to talk about other things? What would be the benefit of going on and on about something if it can be avoided?
 - I hope you see what I did there. "Omit needless words" (Strunk 21).

GOOD THINGS COME TO THOSE WHO DO NOT WAIT

The important thing about creating content is to not wait too long to do it. Don't make the mistake I did and spend most of your time analyzing comedy. If you do that, you'll gear yourself towards being a comedy enthusiast rather than a content creator.

What makes creating content difficult is that you suck at it for so long. Especially at the beginning, even if initially you are proud of your work, revisit it in a few months. A lot of it tends to be cringe worthy. That's because with comedy you're always learning ways to be better, so it's only natural that your content will get better too. The key is to be prolific.

Illustrating this point, here's a great quote from Amy Poehler in the book *Poking a Dead Frog*:

"I'm paraphrasing that great quote from [*This American Life* host] Ira Glass—basically the sentiment of, 'Keep doing it, even though all your stuff is going to be pretty bad. But don't be discouraged by its imperfections; embrace it if it's half good. Fake it till you make it. Put things up. If they're sloppy, keep trying.' I love his thought that nobody carves out this perfect jewel. Everybody struggles and does all these half attempts, and it's really more about time than it is about perfection" (Sacks 2014).

Start creating comedy soon. And do it often. The more you try, the more you learn to control how to communicate with the audience. You have to know the different levers that are at your disposal, and you have to know how to play on them to bring your point across. Scott Dikkers, the founding editor of The Onion, described this responsibility:

"The writer's job is to manipulate the reader's emotions, to push their buttons — and if you don't know what you're doing, you're never going to succeed, whether you're writing satire or anything else" (Shleyner 2018).

Take responsibility for your work. When you ask for an audience, you ask for their time – be prepared, intentional, and don't waste the opportunity.

PART 2: NOT TO BE

A JOURNEY'S END

In a technical sense, we've discussed how to think like a comedian – how to analyze bits, how to find the truth in humor, and how to make the choices that create effective comedy. What's missing, however, is the after effect of implementing this mindset. Namely: is it worth it? To think like a comedian one must constantly see their surrounding environment as a potential joke. For me, this meant insistently asking “why did that joke tickle me so?” or “what could change to make this mundane situation funny?” It meant viewing the people and objects in my environment as levers for humor, rather than components of a present existence.

So, to round out this discussion of what it truly means to think like a comedian, I end with the thoughts that accompany implementing this mindset. Here I explore the three stages of my particular dream deferred – the initial discovery stage, the doubts and disillusionment that followed, and the decision I made to discontinue the pursuit. I begin each section with a quote, one that was most fresh on my mind during each of these phases.

DISCOVERY

“I just always loved stand-up. It's like magic. You say something, and a whole room full of people laughs together. Say something else, they laugh again. The fact that people come to see that and participate in that... I don't know, it's just like magic”

(Dave Chappelle 2001).

Comedy is like magic. When we find something funny, it's an instantaneous recognition. Most times we laugh and other times we might let a little air out our nose. Either way, without having

to consciously think through the presented joke, we recognize if the bit is funny for us. More so, the fact that multiple people can agree in that instant – when we hear a whole audience laugh at a performance, a whole classroom laugh at a joke, or even a group of friends laugh in a shared understanding, the fact that the agreement is made in a second without consultation is exciting. It's the closest thing to magic, and that's why I wanted to understand it.

Further, I enjoyed analyzing comedy because it was such a wonderful respite from how much I initially hated college. I entered freshman year as an undeclared student, so it was hard to find a sense of community and latch onto a career path; it felt like nothing made sense and I would liken it to floating. I think I was so fixated on comedy because it was something to cling onto in that unsure time – reinventing one's self through hobbies is all the more impactful in uncertain times. How'd I start? Randomly one day I saw Dave Chappelle's stand-up special in my YouTube recommended videos, clicked on it, and since then I've been hooked.

Luckily for me, comedy is one of those special art forms that has a variety of manifestations – stand-up, improv (both short and long-form), satire, short stories, comics, even in the everyday. There was no limit to analysis, and an abundance of rules I could apply to comedy, myself, and the world at large.

A lot of what I discovered in comedy is the bulk of this paper – the necessity of incongruity and truth, the techniques that can transform a bit. However, what kept me hooked on comedy was the wider applications I saw both in myself and the world. In pursuing this interest of comedy, I realized I had to be okay with being uncomfortable. I had to put myself out there, join clubs, and meet others on campus with similar interests. This quote by Tina Fey certainly helped: “You can't be that kid standing at the top of the waterslide, overthinking it. You have to go down the

chute.” I realized it’s much easier to go out of your comfort zone than I had thought. You just had to stop thinking and jump more; take chances, don’t overthink things. When you’re always uncomfortable you never are. Ambiguity becomes normal and those uncertain waters are ideal for a re-definition of the self.

Lastly, I realized while I was learning about comedy, I would come across interesting things about the world as large as well. One of my favorite examples is this idea that you can only discover the moon once; it relates to this hidden rule in comedy that you can’t perform a joke that someone else has already made.

For example, two famous comedians Russell Peters and Trevor Noah had similar stand-up bits about the Russian language sounding like talking backwards. While joke-stealing might have been involved (who’s to say), I think there’s a deeper message there. We all live in the same world don’t we – so aren’t we bound to make the similar observations eventually? Is it fair that only one person gets to make public that observation, and why is it that once somebody does, those after them cannot, or at least not with the same recognition of honest discovery? Similarly, if someone decided they wanted to rediscover the moon, even though we’ve already landed on the moon, if someone on their own does it all again, they won’t discover it for the first time. It won’t be as special, simply because someone had already done it. You are born into a world where the people before you already had dibs on what’s been accomplished. It was realizations like these that inspired me to continue analyzing comedy – I wasn’t just learning about how humor works or ways I can reinvent myself, but also about underlying mechanisms of the world.

DOUBT & DISILLUSIONMENT

“As far as whether you choose this career, I have not found that to be a choice. In my experience, somehow or another, your brain has already told you that this is a reasonable life to live... And the deeper you get into it, it’s very hard to get out of it, even when things aren’t going well” (Marc Maron 2015).

After a while in the discovery phase, I started to think more and more about the practicality of a career in comedy. Specifically, about the odds of actually “making” it and the kind of life I would have before then. I remember seeing alumni from my improv group post about their stand-up shows on Facebook, asking people to come. I hated the neediness of it all. Needing people to come see you perform. Needing an audience. I would also come across stories about the lives of successful comedians before they made it – sleeping on people’s couches, sharing apartments with 7 other people to pay rent, and friends and family doubting your life choices.

In addition to this reality check, I started to realize that comedy as a subject had its own faults. The most frustrating thing about comedy, and most arts for that matter, is the subjective/objective dichotomy. Even if something is subjectively funny to me, it may not be funny to you, let alone everyone. And that’s the price of any art form – it is because there is no ironclad formula that nuances and variations exist. However, it is still frustrating when you spend so much time on a joke you find funny, only to show it to people and get mixed reactions. In fact, I would actually prefer a wholly negative response instead of a mixed bag. If they unanimously hated it, you could analyze what specifically about a piece didn’t click. But the fact that comedy is different for everyone means you can never find something that works for everyone. It is too subjective, and I realized it was impractical to base a life around that.

I also started to grow disillusioned with specific facets from different types of comedy. First off, with improv – I feel like it's just one big affectation. I would feel uncomfortable a lot of the time when I was on stage, playing characters and doing voices. Improv encourages you to go out of your comfort zone, and while it was interesting at first, I realized I never got around to really enjoying it. Going back to that quote from Tina Fey, I realized I could only jump off the chute so many times. Maybe this ride's just not for me. Because I preferred stand-up anyway, I would reassure myself that maybe improvisational comedy wasn't my type of comedy. I would justify this discomfort by realizing that Dave Chappelle and Jerrod Carmichael wouldn't be very good at doing improv simply because their material is more content and observation oriented.

However, I started to not like some things about stand-up as well. Even stand-up comedy, which I believe is the most genuine of art forms (a comedian on stage only with his thoughts and observations), has elements that are not genuine at all. For example, you speak to an audience like you're coming up with these realizations in the moment. But, it's not wholly genuine because you repeat the same jokes each time you perform. That's why when you see a comedian say a joke you've already heard, it feels weird. So, when this barrier is broken, the joke loses some of its value. Here's an example of a very good comedian, Cameron Esposito, doing the same set (and wearing the same outfit, how could she) twice. Although both sets are nearly identical, to observe this point you can simply watch the first joke (the first 45 seconds or so).

(“This Outfit is For Attracting Women”)



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=87ihPfyylco>

(“Cameron Esposito Stand-Up 8/14/14”)



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zIUWrbY86Yk>

Lastly, I realized I didn’t like what my brain was becoming. As I mentioned earlier in discussing neuroplasticity, by engaging in asking myself why everything was funny, I trained my brain to instinctively think that way. I was always clinging to deconstructing something, whether it be some piece of comedy I came across or trying to imagine ways a present situation could be funnier. It was exhausting, and in hindsight, too much. I burnt out. As I mentioned before, I wish I had spent more time creating comedy rather than analyzing all the time.

Further, in imagining that comedy would be my future, I started to idealize suffering. There’s this idea that to create really good art you had to have gone through some ordeal. Further, I thought that because I would eventually be suffering (being poor, struggling to make it, etc.), it would be good to start getting acclimated to that feeling now. I realized at one point that I was the one making these choices – forcing my brain to constantly analyze and encouraging my mind to get used to unhappiness. Why? Was comedy really all that great? Which did I prefer – liberty of thought or a frozen, mechanical mindset?

DECISION

“And now, for something completely different.” (Monty Python’s Flying Circus).

The big turning point for me came when I got a taste of the kind of life I was running away from – the rat-race, the 9-5. Over one summer I interned at Target Headquarters in Minnesota. Best summer of my life, easily. For anyone trying to outrun a dream, I recommend reversing all the circumstances that led you to it. Interning was the complete opposite of my freshman year – I had a community of interns, I had a purpose (albeit a loose purpose, completing my intern project), and I had fun. I was so busy with work that I had less time to think about comedy, and I realized, I had quite a good time just being.

A really impactful moment that summer was going to an open-mic night at the ACME Comedy Club in Minneapolis. I was having a bad day, so I went alone and I remember it raining. At the show, my favorite act was the last guy to come up. A 30-something with a shirt struggling to fit his potbelly. He did a 20-minute set, which I thought was surprisingly good. But, in a way, the whole event was disheartening. I realized this guy was giving so much of his life to comedy and this is what it got him: being the closing act of an open-mic night. He was talking about how he was trying to get a set on a late-night show, but that was another kick. It made me realize that the comedians I see on TV are the ones who *make* it, the tip of the iceberg. The ones who really get to have it all – the late-night hosts, the stars of SNL, the comedians with Netflix stand-up specials – they make it seem easy because they achieved their success. I thought this guy at the open-mic was talented, but he was still struggling. Did I want to take that chance? I had previously thought about this impracticality, but this was one of the first times I was visualizing an example in which talent did not necessarily equal success. Sure, success can be the reward of

the art rather than a comfortable life, but which one is worth the hard work? And if I ever wanted to leave comedy, what skills would I have left to begin again?

That night, I remember not laughing out loud during his set because (as I've mentioned before), I was concentrating on analyzing the comedy instead of laughing. The comedian called me out during his performance and said, "hey brown lady, why do you look so upset?" I wanted to tell him it was because his jokes were so good that I was concentrating on deconstructing them rather than laughing. I wanted to assure him I was fully enjoying myself. Looking back, I wonder if I truly was.

I realized later on that you can create to create, not for someone else. Even if you don't perform in front of an audience, the observations are still intact. This way, I would save more of my mind for me, and not for something I was pursuing. I would get to think more for myself, and less for an obsession.

Sure, there are negatives to deferring a dream. You question yourself, you question the strength of your gut feelings. There's a lack of trust for one's intuition. I still feel dumb whenever I see an inspirational quote, urging one to follow his or her dreams. I feel dumb for buying into that, and then also for giving up on it.

A RECONCILIATION OF PARADOX

"Again, you can't connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backward. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future. You have to trust in something — your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever. This approach has never let me down, and it has made all the difference in my life" (Steve Jobs 2005).

I came across this quote my freshman year and would often use it to justify my plan to pursue comedy. Romanticizing the decision to follow one's gut; having faith in the universe to work itself out. How naïve. Sure, the dots connected eventually – I wouldn't feel like whatever it is I am today without my interest in comedy. There are consolation prizes – I got over my stage fright, I am better at thinking on my feet thanks to improv; even if I don't perform on a stage, I've gotten better at making myself laugh. I've learned *something*. I've understood that the world is full of incongruities and truths and we simply must be aware and open to seek them out.

As a final joke, I present the ultimate paradox: loving comedy, but deciding not to pursue it. And how would that be reconciled? What truth would patch together that incongruity? I'd say it's realizing that there are certain elements of life that are more important than a dream. Sure, this resolve could be selling out and giving up all wrapped up in one. But moving on is also moving forward; it is dissecting a frog but also letting it be.

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